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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Project Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared emotionally, socially, intellectually, and physically for kindergarten. The sample included 12 kindergarten teachers and 12 Head Start teachers in a county school system located in northeast Tennessee. The teachers completed a survey that was administered at the beginning of the 1997 school year in order for the kindergarten teachers to observe their students who attended Head Start the year before. The data were analyzed using a t-test for independent means. Data analysis showed a significant difference between the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared Head Start students are emotionally, socially, and intellectually for kindergarten. There was no significant difference in their perceptions for physical preparedness. Overall, the Head Start teachers perceived their students as more prepared for kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/SM)

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Running Head: PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS

The Perceptions of Head Start Teachers and Kindergarten Teachers on How Well Students are Prepared for Kindergarten

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared emotionally, socially, intellectually, and physically for kindergarten. The sample included 12 kindergarten teachers and 12 Head Start teachers in a county school system located in Northeast Tennessee. The teachers completed a survey written by the researcher using the Likert scale. The survey was administered at the beginning of the school year in order for the kindergarten teachers to observe their students who attended Head Start the year before. The data were then analyzed using a t-test for independent means. The data analysis showed a significant difference between the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared Head Start students are emotionally, socially, and intellectually, for kindergarten. There was no significant difference in the perceptions on physical preparedness. Overall, the Head Start teachers perceived their students as more prepared for kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers.

Review of the Literature

Head Start, a federally funded preschool program, was established 31 years ago because studies showed that low income children had disadvantages in many areas as compared to other children (Zigler & Muenchow, 1992, chap. 1). Some of the disadvantages were less nutritious food, less medical care, and less parental involvement in the children's learning. These disadvantages caused low-income children to do poorly in school. Because of this, one of the focuses of the Head Start program was to prepare its students for kindergarten. Just as the name implies, these disadvantaged children were given a head start to activities that would better prepare them for kindergarten.

Another related purpose for the Head Start establishment was to overcome cognitive, social emotional and physical deficits that frequently accompany growing up in an economically deprived home. It was designed to enhance school readiness so those low-income children could benefit fully from the school experience (Cotton &Conklin, 1989). Head Start was also developed as an experiment to see if the cycle of poverty could be interrupted through focusing on families with young children. Head Start has served over 13 million children since 1965 (Zigler & Styfco, 1994). As of 1991, 5.6 million children under age 6 were living in poverty in the United States. That was nearly 1 in 4 children (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1993).

With so many children living in poverty, Head Start was needed to enhance the preschool experience, which helped low income students' gain a head start intellectually and socially. These gains affected students' maturity level and reduced need for special education placement. Enhanced scholastic achievement eventually helped them to stay in school longer (Cotton & Conklin, 1989). Studies have found that the short term benefits

of preschool graduates included better task completion and more cooperative interaction with peers. The long-term effects consisted of higher grades, higher social and emotional maturity, more frequent high school graduates, and better attitude towards school and better self-esteem (Cotton & Conklin, 1989; Bauch, 1988).

Experts who have studied the Head Start program found that "the impressive and immediate gains for children served by Head Start have been well documented, particularly in terms of educational achievement" (Washington & Bailey, 1995, p. 13). Another notable gain was that the Head Start students were less likely to repeat grade in school.

Whereas academic gains were documented in the Head Start program, focus was also on preparing students for kindergarten in other three areas: emotional, physical, and social. However, Mallory and Goldsmith's (1991) concern was whether the teachers met these challenges. Were the students' well prepared emotionally, physically, intellectually, and socially as they begin Kindergarten? Mallory and Goldsmith further noted that in order for the students to be prepared, the teachers needed to be well trained and familiar with the Head Start curriculum.

According to Nurss (1987), students who graduated from Head Start were expected to work independently as well as in small and large groups. They were expected to finish a task, listen to a story, and follow two or three oral directions. Expectations also included respecting the property of others. Students also needed to distinguish between work and play. Certain physical skills using large muscles such as walking, running and climbing were expected as well as fine motor skills such as use of pencil, crayons, and scissors.

Similarly, Nurss (1987) also stated that visual and auditory discrimination of objects such as alphabet letters and kindergarten teachers expected numbers. Also, teachers expected students to identify colors and shapes, and to recognize their own names.

Readiness for Kindergarten depends on a child's development of social, perceptual, motor and language skills. Many schools systems raised the entrance age for kindergarten hoping children would increase their success in kindergarten by being order. Research does not support this action. "Most studies show that chronological age alone is not a factor in success in kindergarten" (Meisels, 1987, p.70).

To help children to be ready for kindergarten in California, the Santa Clara Head Start Transition Project helped students by visiting kindergarten classrooms, having kindergarten teachers visit Head Start classrooms and by attending special activities in the kindergarten classrooms. The Head Start teachers also sang songs and played games about different aspects of kindergarten. This encouraged communications between the Head Start classroom and kindergarten classroom. It also helped the Head Start students to have a better understanding of what kindergarten was all about. This same project continued up to the third grade to help children to make a successful transitions to each grade (Fleck, 1995).

Another factor that has contributed to the success of the Head Start program in preparing students for kindergarten is the training of the teachers in the program. Warger (1988) indicated that early childhood teachers who were well trained constantly encouraged children to explore and develop thinking and problem solving skills. Also,

research indicated that Head Start programs benefited from extended research on human development and developmentally appropriate activities (Washington & Bailey, 1995).

The introduction of the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential in 1971 played a major role in maintaining high quality services for young children in the Head Start program by offering training to the Head Start teachers through several institutions sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Lenhoff, 1988). In order for the Head Start personnel to qualify for this training, they had to have a high school diploma and five years experience in the Head Start program. The CDA was federally funded for Head Start personnel and provided on the job training. Fieldwork was a part of the on going training that was based on in-service experience (Thompson, 1992).

Zigler and Muenchow (1992) observed that lack of consistent educational training for some Head Start teachers caused the curriculum to be less effective thus depriving the students the experience needed for their preparation to attend kindergarten and beyond. The researchers indicated that not all Head Start teachers have CDA credential and therefore not very effective as Head Start teachers.

Writing on the same issue Zigler and Finn-Stevenson (1996) examined whether the Head Start teachers who did not receive CDA credential perceived themselves the same as those who had the CDA credential. The results did not reveal any significant difference. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of Head Start teachers and kindergarten teachers on how well students are prepared for kindergarten.

In conclusion, Head Start has been going strong for over 30 years. It offers many positive things to its students and their families. As mentioned earlier, the main purpose the Head Start program was to make things better for poor children and their families. Several studies have indicated the benefits for students going through the program. The future for the Head Start program looks bright as President Clinton increased the programs funding from $2.8 billion in 1993 to $8 billion in 1998. Also proposed was to extend Head Start to a full day, year-round and include younger aged children (Kassebaum, 1994).

Methodology and Procedures

The population for this study consisted of all Head Start teachers and all kindergarten teachers located in a county school system in Upper East Tennessee. All of the Head Start teachers and kindergarten teachers were female and past the age of 25. Some Head Start teachers had college degrees and some had a CDA credential. The kindergarten teachers had college degrees while some had also completed their Master's degree.

The sample for this study consisted of twelve Head Start teachers and twelve kindergarten teachers who were randomly selected from twenty-seven kindergarten teachers in the county school system. The school system was located in Northeast Tennessee.

The instruments that were used to collect data were two surveys written by the researcher. The two instruments contained the same statements, which were arranged in the same order from numbers 1-20. However, the statements were worded differently to

reflect the perceptions of the kindergarten and Head Start teachers without altering the content. The Likert Scale was used as the design for the surveys. The instruments were constructed through the use of committee of two experts in the area of Head Start curriculum. The construction of the questions was also guided by current literature on the four areas targeted. Each survey consisted of twenty statements. The Head Start teachers completed one survey concerning their perceptions of how prepared their students were for kindergarten. The kindergarten teachers completed the second survey to determine their perceptions of how well prepared their Head Start students were for kindergarten. Statements number 1, 5, 9, 14, and 18 in both surveys were concerned with the emotional aspect of development, while statements number 2, 6, 8, 10, and 15 in both surveys applied to the social development. Intellectual statements on both surveys were numbers 3, 7, 12, 16, and 19. Physical development was discussed in numbers 4, 11, 13, 17, and 20 in both surveys. Both surveys were hand delivered by the researcher and the teachers were assured that they would remain anonymous. After completing the survey, the teachers mailed their responses to the researcher in a postage-paid envelope.

Procedures

The first step in conducting this study was to obtain permission to survey the Head Start teachers from the Director of Head Start. Also, permission to survey the kindergarten teachers was requested from the Superintendent of Schools in the county school system located in northeast Tennessee. After obtaining permission, the researcher constructed the two different surveys using the Likert Scale. The two surveys were almost identical in that they both included statements concerning the emotion, social,

intellectual, and physical preparedness of Head Start students. The difference between the survey given to the Head Start teachers and the kindergarten teachers was the kindergarten teachers were asked to determine the preparedness of their Head Start students according to their observations in the classroom. The Head Start teachers were asked to respond to statements concerning how well the Head Start curriculum prepared Head Start students for kindergarten. The Head Start teachers and the kindergarten teachers anonymously completed the surveys at the beginning of the year 1997 and returned them to the researcher in the mail. The researcher analyzed the data and tabulated the results.

Results

Data were analyzed using measures of central tendency, dispersion, and t-test for independent samples.

Research Questions

Four research questions were used to guide the analysis of this study. All data were analyzed using .05 level of significance.

1. Is there a difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared emotionally for kindergarten?

2. Is there a difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared socially for kindergarten?

3. Is there a difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared intellectually for kindergarten?

4. Is there a difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well Head Start students are prepared physically for kindergarten?

T-tests for independent samples were conducted to test the four non-directional hypotheses associated with the four questions. A significant difference was found in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on the emotional sub-scale ($t = -4.38$). Results are displayed in Table 1. Similarly, a significant difference was realized between kindergarten and Head Start teachers' perception on the social sub-scale ($t = -2.71$). Results are displayed in Table 2. Also, a significant difference was found between kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on the intellectual sub-scale ($t = -2.43$). Results are shown in Table 3. However, when kindergarten teachers perceptions were compared to the Head Start teachers' perceptions on physical scale, there was no significant difference found ($t = -1.95$). Results can be found in Table 4.

Discussion

Emotionally Prepared

When examining the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared emotionally their Head Start students were for kindergarten, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of kindergarten

teachers and Head Start teachers. Head Start teachers perceived their Head Start students as more emotionally prepared for kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers did when the same students attended kindergarten. The Head Start teachers felt that the Head Start curriculum was proficient in preparing the Head Start students emotionally for kindergarten.

Socially Prepared

While investigating the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared socially their Head Start students were for kindergarten, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers. Head Start teachers perceived their Head Start students as more socially prepared for kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers did when the same students attended kindergarten. The Head Start teachers felt they had worked a great deal with their students on social skills.

Intellectually Prepared

When inquiring about the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared intellectually their Head Start students were for kindergarten, the results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers. The Head Start teachers perceived their Head Start students more intellectually prepared for kindergarten than the kindergarten teachers did when the same students attended kindergarten. The Head Start

teachers felt that the Head Start curriculum had lessons that prepared Head Start students intellectually for kindergarten.

Physically Prepared

When examining the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared physically their Head Start students were for kindergarten, the results indicated that there was no significant difference in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers. The Head Start teachers and the kindergarten teachers perceived their Head Start students were physically prepared for kindergarten.

Conclusions

This study explored the difference between the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared emotionally, socially, intellectually, and physically Head Start students are for kindergarten. After analyzing the surveys written by the researcher, a significant difference was found between the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers on how well prepared emotionally, socially, and intellectually Head Start students were for kindergarten. No significant difference was found in the perceptions of kindergarten teachers and Head Start teachers regarding how well Head Start students were prepared physically for kindergarten.

Table 1

Independent t-test of Emotionally Prepared

Group	M	SD	t-value
Kindergarten Teachers	19.17	2.17	-4.38*
Head Start Teachers	23.42	2.57	

*Note: Means and Standard Deviation Scores are included P<.05

Table 2

Independent t-test of Socially Prepared

Group	M	SD	t-value
Kindergarten Teachers	19.50	4.08	-2.71*
Head Start Teachers	23.17	2.29	

*Note: Means and Standard Deviation Scores are included P<.05

Table 3

Independent t-test of Intellectually Prepared

Group	M	SD	t-value
Kindergarten Teachers	14.83	6.32	-2.43*
Head Start Teachers	20.08	4.03	

*Note: Means and Standard Deviation Scores are included P<.05

Table 4

Independent t-test of Physically Prepared

Group	M	SD	t-value
Kindergarten Teachers	19.00	4.53	-1.95
Head Start Teachers	21.92	2.54	

Note: Means and Standard Deviation Scores are included p<. 05

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